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The first in a series

April 20-22: The Next Step, the circular procurement congress in Amsterdam. I was there, heard exciting ideas, learned about working examples and met a lot of inspiring people. I enjoyed it and I'm proud to be part of this community.

A few years ago I was working with Michel Schuurman from MVO Nederland (CSR Netherlands), preparing a theme for a weekend working on breakthroughs for the circular economy. Our theme was procurement, because back then we had the feeling that procurement was a key process in stimulating a circular economy. Procurement as an instrument of change and stimulation was not a new idea, but by connecting it directly to the circular economy we saw all the possibilities and opportunities. In one of our meetings, we came up with a name for the theme: circular procurement. I didn't know it then, but it was one of those moments of change.

Circular collaboration

In 2016, I found myself involved in the organisation of an international congress about circular procurement. It was attended by more than 100 people from more than 23 different countries and from a variety of different organisations.

Circular procurement is seen by many as a key driver to stimulate a circular economy. Why? Because more and more manufacturers work on circular concepts and new business models for their products. They need clients to make it happen. Procurement creates demand and defines markets for these circular products. That's what circular procurement is about: stimulating the circular economy using the power of procurement. It's about collaboration across the supply chain during the lifecycle of products.

For a procurer, it means that he (or she) has to understand the principles of circular economy and the new business models that come with it. To obtain and use products in a new and more circular way, he also has to be able to procure in an innovation-friendly manner: open, focussing on functionality instead of detailed specifications, and in need of performance rather than on the products themselves. That's not particularly difficult for a professional procurer, but is often not what he is used to doing in his day-to-day work.

To help the procurer to act more circular, his client needs to understand how procurement can help the circular economy. It's about the ambition of an organisation. If you want to become a more circular organisation, you need your procurement team to procure circular products. Your managers, budget holders and policymakers must see that they are the ones that can deliver on this ambition by articulating the need for circular products. As a client they steer procurement. If they want circular products the procurer can facilitate that. And that works much easier then when the procurer is the one to advocate circularity to his internal client. Circular procurement is about collaboration in the organisation.

At the congress, I saw a lot of working examples from a variety of organisations, private and public, big and small, who dared to take the first step - to search for circularity and see what happens. The examples showed lessons learnt about articulation, process thinking, market engagement, collaboration in the supply chain, collaboration in their own organisation, defining ambitions and more - all delivering insights and experiences that will be used to build up a knowledge base. Circular economy has just started and so has circular procurement.

The power of one

Circular procurement brings change. In the type of contracts you sign and manage, in collaboration in your organisation, in the way procurers engage with the market, in professionalization and in the lifecycle chain of product. Like all changes, circular procurement starts with a first step. There is always someone who sees the opportunity and decides to do things in a different way than before. It might be about furniture, ICT hardware, building renovation or office equipment. It might be about joining a supply chain collaboration, setting up a pilot or doing research. It might be started by a category manager, a policymaker, a project manager or the deputy mayor. It doesn't matter, it's where change begins. That's what is called 'the power of one'. (Or two - thanks Michel, I'm proud of us!)

2017

What's also the power of one is the decision to start scaling up. This one man from the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), Farid Yaker, stood up in Amsterdam and promised to take our event further. He will organise the next Circular Procurement Congress in 2017, in Paris.

Best Regards,

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